

# These smooth operators beat the guys

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Sheila Celestain, left, and Carolyn Kelly rule the rails as Metro's top train operators.

There are no bucking broncos or grease-painted clowns at this rodeo, and cowboy hats fall well outside the rigorous official dress code. There are, however, significant bragging rights on the line.

And this year, the challenge of lassoing some global recognition for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority at the [International Rail Rodeo](#) is in the train-tested hands of two women: Sheila Celestain and Carolyn Kelly.

The veteran Blue Line operators earned their trip to this week's competition in Dallas by taking top honors in Metro's in-house train rodeo earlier this year. They confronted obstacles on a closed rail course, mastered all the verbal and visual instructions that were thrown at them, and excelled in categories ranging from uniform inspection to train evacuation procedures to the smoothness of the ride.

Women have won Metro's rail rodeo before—in 1998 and 2006—but this is the first time an all-female slate swept the internal contest, with the top two finishers earning the right to compete in “the show.”

Celestain, Metro's top train operator this year, and Kelly, the runner up, are part of a culture in which women operators are still very much in the minority, and where the diplomatic skills needed to deal with thousands of daily passengers often are as essential as the technical finesse required to maneuver a 100,000-pound train car.

Women make up just 25% of the nearly 300 train operators currently on Metro's staff.

But they often bring something special to the job, says rail division transportation manager Tom Jasmin.

“Over the years, I've noticed that women are more intuitive and they pay attention to detail more than I think men

do,” he says. “They’re a little smoother on the braking, smoother on the acceleration...it’s just the smoothness of the ride you get. And when they get on the intercom, they’re a little more patient.”

Whatever happens in Dallas, it’s been quite a year for Metro’s top twosome. They were temporarily pulled off their Blue Line duties to become part of an elite crew chosen to test drive the new Expo Line as it prepared to open last month. They’ve transported VIPs, posed for photos with beaming officials and had their work immortalized in video. (Check out Celestain’s test ride with Supervisor Yaroslavsky [here](#) and catch a glimpse of Kelly driving the train on Expo’s inaugural run [here](#).)

“Best year I’ve ever had since I worked for Metro,” says Celestain, who, like Kelly, is a 22-year Metro veteran who spent years driving a bus before making the leap to trains more than a decade ago.

If they’re worried about what’s coming their way at the international competition, it doesn’t show. In an interview Tuesday on the platform of Expo’s La Cienega station, both women seemed cool, confident and matter-of-fact. They also looked textbook-perfect: immaculately-pressed light blue shirts, dark sweater vests, regulation black shoes. (Hello, uniform inspectors.)

“I’m not sweating it at all. I’m gonna get in there and do what I’ve gotta do,” says Celestain, 56.

“I think we have a good chance,” adds Kelly, 54, who notes that the only potentially worrisome obstacle is having to use unfamiliar trains in Texas, not the Nippon Sharyo P865s and Siemens P2000s they drive at home.

Both credit their time on the Blue Line—Metro’s oldest, longest and busiest light rail—with giving them confidence to face whatever comes their way.

“Anything can happen on the Blue Line at any time,” Kelly says.

Adds Celestain: “After you work over here so long, you learn to just roll with the punches.”

Their boss, Jasmin, thinks working on the Expo opening also may have given the women an edge, since it required driving in a construction zone, where attentiveness and quick reactions are essential and pressure is high.

The competition takes place on Saturday, June 2. Celestain will be driving the train for the L.A. team in Dallas, and her score there will be combined with the scores that she and Kelly rack up in other categories, including a written test.

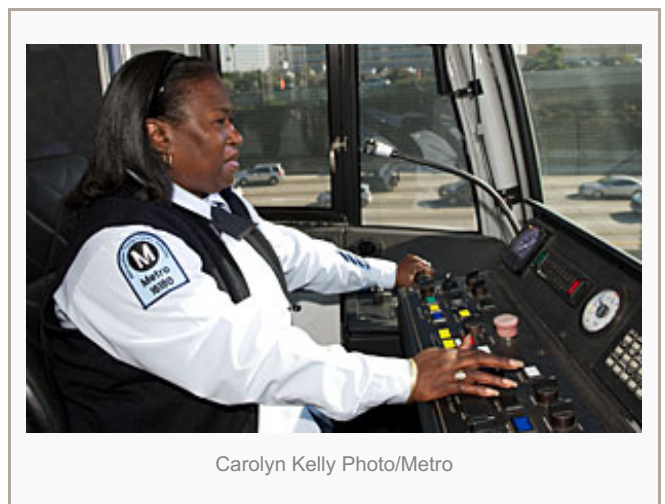
Separate awards are given for operator teams and maintenance teams. In the latter category, Metro is represented this year by Charley Houck of the Blue Line, and Jose Padilla and Alan Addie of the Green Line.

The Metro train operators and “maintainers,” as they’re known, could also be in the running for the event’s annual Grand Champion Award, an honor last brought home by Metro in 2009.

Before they left for the big competition, Celestain and Kelly joked about sensing jealousy from the “haters” among



Sheila Celestain Photo/Metro



Carolyn Kelly Photo/Metro

their male colleagues. Just kidding: everybody is pulling for them, they say. But the guys—like the women themselves—do seem surprised the duo made it to the top their first time out as Metro rodeo contestants.

“They can’t believe it!” Celestain laughs. “They go every year, and this is the first year we went.”

**Updated 6/5/12:** Celestain and Kelly brought home the bronze, placing third behind train operators from Dallas and St. Louis. [All of the winners](#) were hailed as “stellar role models to their peers nationwide” by Michael Melaniphy, president and CEO of the American Public Transportation Association. “They are the best of the best in rail operations and maintenance,” he said.

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